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ABSTRACT

A learning contract is a document, drawn up by a student and his instructor or advisor that specifies what the student will learn, how this will be accomplished, within what period of time, and what the criteria of evaluation will be. The student and instructor agree upon specific objectives, resources to be used, and feedback sessions. Negotiations continue as long as needed to develop a contract acceptable to both parties. After completion of the study, the student may report his satisfaction with the course itself and its relation to his other studies and integration with what he has learned before. (LBH)

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CONTRACTING FOR LEARNING

by

JANET G. DONALD

Imagine the office of History Professor Emerald on a September afternoon. A student has arrived for an interview to discuss his contract in Professor Emerald's course on Methods of Historical Analysis. The student is saying,

"I can see from the course plan that the goals in this course are set up to cover the different methods of historical analysis. My own objectives in this course are to understand and to be able to apply those methods. I think as my chosen in-depth study of a method I'd like to concentrate on Toynbee and because I'm most interested in the analysis of Canadian History, during the second term I'd like to fulfill the 'application' requirement of my contract by studying Lower's method of analysis of the history of Canada. To fulfill my contract, I'll attend the weekly discussion groups and take the bi-weekly tests on the methods of analysis. I'd like to have an interview on October 18th and probably about each 5 weeks after, if that will fit in with your interview schedule, so that I stay on track with Toynbee and, later on, Lower. I pretty well understand the reading list but I notice your course plan says we can use other sources of information, and if it could be arranged, I'd like to interview Professors Magenta and Sable because of the work they've done on analyzing themes in Canadian History. I understand that my evaluation will be based 50% on knowledge of the methods of analysis and I'd like to have 20% of my mark on the Toynbee in-depth study and the remaining 30% on my work on Lower. I don't think there's anything I'm unsure of right now but I certainly appreciate your giving us the option of re-negotiating some parts of the contract, particularly the relative weighting of the in-depth study and the application report, for grades. Three o'clock on October 18th? Yes, thank you, Professor Emerald; and I'll keep one copy of the contract . . ."

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Professor Emerald and his student have just entered into a learning contract for a year's coursework. The student's objectives in the course, set in accordance with the instructor's course plan, the method of fulfilling these objectives, and how the student's learning will be evaluated have been delineated and agreed upon by both parties.

> A learning contract is a document, drawn up by a student and his instructor or advisor, which specifies what the student will learn, how this will be accomplished, and within what period of time, and what the criteria of evaluation will be.

Although learning contracts have been used for entire programs of study, as at Empire State College, the Campus Free College, and Johnstone College, most contracts for learning are set for individual courses. The scope of the course contract usually covers both the goals defined by the instructor in his course and the student's learning objectives in order to meet the required course goals. The contract is between the instructor and the individual student or a group of students registered in the course.

Learning contracts have been employed at all levels of learning, from elementary school to graduate studies and for many different subject matter areas and teaching methods. For example, contracting for learning has been suggested for clinical courses in a medical program as a means of clarifying the goals of the clinical teaching situation (Rauen and Waring, 1972). In a philosophy course in ethics, a contracting system has been successfully used to allow students to determine their rate of learning as well as the area of study they would concentrate on (Barlow, 1974).

As a teaching method, contracting is similar to independent study in that the student is more responsible for planning his work and for working independently. Contracting is not intended, however, to replace important instructor-student interaction or peer relationships. In fact it requires a closer relationship between instructor and student, and is not a substitute for classroom interaction. The focus is rather on the student's responsibility for learning in the course within the framework set out by the instructor. Contracting differs from the conventional method of giving a course in that a highly detailed course plan or framework is needed for each student at the beginning of the term, and that the student is expected to actively plan his participation in the course.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Contracting for Learning

Advantages

1. Contracting for learning allows students to personally plan their work: this can include some choice in curriculum as well as learning method and pace. Students are thus given the opportunity to develop a "set-to-learn" and they tend to develop an attitude of personal responsibility for learning. Contracting also improves the chances for relevant and meaningful learning for the student because, although he must follow the guidelines set by the instructor, he is also allowed choice to fit his interests.

2. The role of the instructor tends to become more one of curriculum developer than information disseminator. The different approaches that his students take lead to broadening perspectives on the course material. At the same time, the instructor's attention focuses on student learning and on his students' strengths and weaknesses in dealing with the course material.

3. Negotiating for learning creates a positive, developmental, and reward-oriented atmosphere rather than a punishing one. Instead of studying to "beat an examination" or avoid failure, the student's attention is focused on achieving goals which he has set. At the same time, the student's individual achievement can be more readily recognized.

4. The relationship and communication between the instructor and the student are closer because they have a personal agreement for learning which they have

discussed at the beginning of the term (Knight, 1974).

5. Student motivation is sustained throughout the course (Barlow, 1974). Students look upon contracts as something belonging to them with the result that the instructor's job becomes one of moderating student efforts within realistic bounds.

6. Contract learning can provide better personal feedback to students. Anderson (1974) considers formative evaluation for learning the principle part of the instructor's role. With the instructor providing feedback to the student throughout the course, the student has better control of his learning behavior.

7. A final advantage of contracting for learning is that clear records of the learning process are available. The instructor therefore has access to students' curriculum choices and instructional preferences and their outcomes, and can use these as aids for course development and for setting learning standards.

Disadvantages

1. Contracting for learning does not replace the need for student contact or classroom interaction. The instructor must provide opportunities for students to contact him and to work with other students. There is no alleviation of instructor responsibility.

2. The instructor must spend more time on planning and on student interviewing. In conjunction with the time spent, a greater demand is placed on the interpersonal skills of both instructor and student.

3. Students may misjudge their organizational skills and learning activities. A feedback system is critical to the success of the learning contract. Students must be aware of the work expectations in the course, as in the example cited at the beginning of this article, or in the recognition of, for example, a ten hour per week work period defined in the contract.

4. The instructor will require more learning resources than those normally expected in a conventional course. In addition to texts and bibliographies, the resources may expand to include a variety of other materials and experts in the vicinity.

Components of a Course Contract

A more detailed examination of a learning contract reveals the following five components:

- Goals of the Course;
- Student Learning Objectives;
- Learning Experiences, Tasks, or Projects;
- Resources to be used; and
- Evaluation of Learning.

Goals of the Course

For the individual instructor who plans to use contracting as a method of learning, the first step is to outline course goals. These may already exist in a course outline, however a more detailed course plan which specifies the concepts and the learning objectives for the course is often needed. Students require an orientation period, often achieved by means of introductory lectures and discussions on the objectives of the course, to become aware of the general parameters and goals of the course.

Armed with a course plan, the instructor then outlines what he considers to be core or essential learning experiences which all students either need to know or display ability in, and those parts of the course which are optional or alternative learning experiences and from among which a student can choose to learn. In order to determine if course or program goals have already been met, the instructor may choose to institute a series of pretests that the student can take for credit and that determine if the student has already learned prerequisite or essential course material.

Student Learning Objectives

The student sets his own objectives taking into account his reasons for being in the course, his learning style, and his level of knowledge in the subject

matter area. One approach suggested at this stage is to have each student bring a written statement of the objectives or goals which he seeks to attain, as well as a brief description of the learning activities and learning resources which the student believes will assure his attainment of the objectives (Barlow, 1974). During the discussion of learning objectives, the instructor aids the student in refining his statement of objectives, so that the objectives meet the student's individual learning needs and involve adequate study of the subject area and so that the student can recognize what subject matter is relevant for his self-development and/or his career preparation.

Underlying the entire orientation procedure is this rationale, "What we try to do in orientation is to teach students how to learn. We stress goal setting and task analysis so they will be able to begin thinking about how they will structure their education. If education is to be ongoing, to serve people throughout their lives, they have to learn how to find answers to problems, where to look them up, people who might know, and so forth" (Fedo, 1973).

▶Learning Experiences

Negotiations continue to determine what learning experiences the student, aided by his instructor, will choose to achieve the objective he has defined. Not only are activities that are to be engaged in listed (such as reading, writing, viewing, and interviewing) there should be a statement relating the learning activities to the objectives that the student has previously identified.

A realistic time-table must be work-worked out between the student and instructor, so that the student knows how to pace himself and knows what is expected of him in terms of work load per day, per week, or per semester. The schedule should also indicate when the student intends to engage in specific learning activities, and when he will make his reports or presentations of evidence of achievement. Working conditions in some contracts are stipulated as specifically as to number of hours per day to be spent on the contract and the actual places where the work will occur. Although Stewart and Shanks (1973) state that students at first may consider this part of contracting to be overspecification, they quickly discover the positive results of preplanning their activities in such detail.

▶Resources

An area for documentation, lists of resources available, and bibliographies constitute an essential component for contract learning. Under the heading of resources are included not only academic books and journals, but also experts, films, conference proceedings, project reports, literary and artistic artifacts, and cassettes, depending on the student's objectives and his field of study.

The contract itself should be highly specific in identifying the resource materials to be used, up to and including page numbers in texts, outside readings, supporting references, film footage, or audio-tapes. It is suggested by Stewart and Shanks (1973) that instructional material should be cross-modal, utilizing print, non-print, and live contacts, balanced according to the individual student's optimum learning mode. One important resource that should not be neglected is contact with peer groups for discussion or tutoring purposes.

▶Evaluation

The evaluation of student learning in a contract is perhaps more critical because it is individually designed and yet must meet academic standards and supply prerequisite learning for later courses. Clearly, when the contract is set, the mode of evaluation and the evidence on which the evaluation is to be based must be carefully specified. The student should be required to show how, by whom, when and on the basis of what evidence he will be evaluated. The instructor should plan to retain the evidence or a detailed record for his file. The evaluation and the grade, where it is used, will reflect satisfactory completion of the learning activities which manifest achievement of the stated objectives.

Often, where grades are negotiated

as part of the contract, the student can build in grade options so that if the task should prove heavier and time less available than planned, he can have alternate routes for a grade of A or a grade of B, for example. Insistence on keeping the contract, however, and maintaining the learning activities and the pace which the student has set should be made a standard part of the contract, although some negotiation or renegotiation of learning experiences and standards can be built into the contract as well. This, of course, will depend upon the amount of time which the instructor has available and how much time he wishes to spend on renegotiating contracts.

One way to achieve openness with accountability is to encourage students to keep accurate records or logs of their progress. This can be done through a progress sheet, listing the minimum work required and extra work done (Berta, 1974). An open access record book in the resource area can be used for verification of student work done while at the same time acting as a study incentive.

In the evaluation of learning, the use of pre-tests, built-in tests, and final tests has been mentioned. Built-in tests can be designed primarily as check points, but also to demonstrate to the student that he is learning. Final evaluation tests are indicators of competency or lack of it. Usually lack of competency means that the student will be required to repeat portions of the contract using somewhat altered content, resources, and methods. Stewart and Shanks (1973) suggest use of the term "competency" instead of "mastery" and define competency as "the minimal ability required to progress." The individual instructor must specify in each instance what constitutes minimal ability.

Evaluation sessions can be used formatively or developmentally to provide feedback in many areas: the evaluation may range from a determination of whether the student has been able to obtain appropriate instructional resources to a post-test to measure the level of achievement of a particular objective followed by an analysis for further achievement. Some experts suggest that evaluation sessions should be scheduled on a regular basis. If evaluation sessions are prescheduled, the instructor can use the results to monitor student progress and can plan for individual differences.

To improve feedback to the instructor mid-term evaluations are highly useful. Another method of ensuring feedback is to require, as one of the outcomes of the contract, a narrative or report of the experiences which includes not only the student's satisfaction with the course but its relation to the student's other studies and integration with what he has learned before.

Once the contract document has been completed and signed by both student and instructor, copies should be made available to both. Often, signed contracts are submitted to a responsible third party such as an advisory committee, a contracting centre, the head of a department or Dean of faculty.

* * * *

Briefly, the procedure for learning by contract is:

1. Instructor outlines course goals in a detailed course plan.
2. Instructor orients students to course parameters and goals.
3. Student outlines his learning objectives in the course, the learning activities he will engage in, and the learning resources he intends to use.
4. Instructor and student discuss and refine the learning objectives, activities, and resources to ensure that the objectives meet the student's learning needs, and the course goals.
5. Instructor and student negotiate learning schedule and specify mode of evaluation of learning and expected outcomes.
6. Instructor defines competency or minimal ability required to progress in the course.
7. Contract is used by student and instructor to guide the learning process throughout the course period.
8. Feedback sessions ensure that contracted activities are proceeding

and allow for adjustments to be made.

Postscript: There are Professor Emeralds at McGill University. If you are interested in meeting them or in discussing the possibilities of contracting for learning, please use the "Contracting for Learning Workshop" form in this newsletter.

Resources on Contracting

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If you are interested in attending a workshop on contracting for learning please return the following request form to:

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